

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

death of Christ, and two other passages connecting the deliverance from sin wrought by Christ with the ancient sacrifices prescribed in the Mosaic ritual as a means of forgiveness. Lastly, in the Book of Revelation we found three most conspicuous assertions that the blood and death of Christ were the means of deliverance from sin.

In our next paper I shall discuss the teaching of the Book of Acts and of the Epistles of Peter on the great subject now before us.

JOSEPH AGAR BEET.

THE MIRACLES OF CHRIST.

II.

WE have seen that what the Christian miracles imply is not a superseding of the forces of nature, but the wielding of them in a more than human grasp. Jesus Himself regarded them as a manifestation of God, that God who is now resting from creation, and into whose sabbath we that believe do enter. They cannot be a violation of this very sabbath by new exertions of creative power, for Christ did only what he saw His Father do, and was faithful as a Son in His Father's house. Now it is certain that the objections of science entirely fail to reach, not to speak of refuting, this conception of the miracles.

Invited to retain our faith in Jesus, but to reject the miraculous from our creed as an accretion, we have rejoined that this proposal ignores the existence of the supernatural in the very conception of Jesus. Thence it cannot, upon any theory whatever, be eliminated without denying all the laws of that human nature above which this conception towers, sublime, and even now without a parallel, although the model is before us, and although He is for ever repro-

ducing Himself in the bosom of the Church. When all is said, the miracles are not a stumbling-block except because they transcend the ordinary experience of mankind so amazingly, and, for men who deny God, so inexplicably. But why are not the story of Christ and His teaching and its influence (wherever they come from, call them history or legend as you please) felt to transcend experience in a manner quite as amazing, and without God, as inexplicable? Why is it not confessed that the problem exists, and what is now demanded is a *vindex nodo dignus*? Only because men are far more deeply impressed by what is physical than what is spiritual, by a disease than a sin, by recovered health than by purity restored.

But there is more to say. If we consent to reject the supernatural, on what ground, with what object, should we still retain our faith in Jesus? "Because," it will assuredly be answered, "we confess what you have just now urged: the teaching of Jesus vouches itself. Its purity is not more phenomenal than its power. If anywhere in the writing of a sage or an ascetic we discover an incomplete parallel for some of his maxims, still we search in vain for a similar grasp on the convictions and affections of mankind. Jesus proves His religion by making it work; by its fruit we know it: its true evidence is experimental, like that of bread. Get rid then of what offends our scientific prepossessions, and you will attain universal acceptance; you will commend the divine morality to our conscience, and the divine sorrow to our sympathy." This hope gives all its plausibility to the proposal to revise Christianity. But this hope is a dream. Eliminate the miraculous, and with it vanishes every weapon that arms our religion with practical power over mankind. The authority of scripture vanishes with inspiration. The sacraments vanish, because they assert the resurrection life, shared with us, who are "risen with Him" as from the baptismal wave, and are nourished by His

flesh, which is "life indeed." The day of rest vanishes, because it is a celebration of His resurrection. All the appeals by which sinners are converted vanish, for He does not stand at the door and knock, nor see of the travail of His soul; neither can ingratitude crucify Him afresh; nor have we any High Priest to reassure our unworthiness, unless He is risen from the dead. Our hope is vain, and we are yet in our sins. Thus, when the living Christ is gone, the life fades out of the system also. We need no Goethe to instruct us that all theory is grey while the tree of life is green. Our religion becomes weak and unsubstantial as a ghost, if it has only a ghost of Jesus to rely upon.

Concede the greatest of the miracles, and it is absurd to wrangle, in the name of science, about the rest. Reject this, and there is an end of that religion which cannot, you tell us, be replaced, which has the same evidence that commends our food to us, the evidence of a universal craving and a universal satisfaction. In truth it matters not upon what evidence we rely for our new and non-miraculous Christianity—testimony or intuition or human need—that same evidence attests also the miraculous. Especially is this true of the evidence from its effect on human nature, on the public conscience, for this depends entirely on the conviction that He who suffered and loved is declared to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead.

This brings us to consider the nature of the evidence for the miraculous. A living student of science loves to contrast the evidence on which she accepts her facts with that, for example, upon which religion receives the narrative concerning what he so wittily calls the Gadarene pigs. He apparently supposes that he will refute everything when he can discern one miracle that cannot, if isolated from the rest, offer sufficient independent evidence; and

that it is our duty to present satisfactory and exhaustive proofs for every several miracle. But this is a reversal, both of his own position and of ours. We are no more bound to establish separately the actual occurrence and the miraculous nature of each event in the narrative, than science is bound to demonstrate separately the electrical origin of every lightning-flash, and every Aurora Borealis. Explain one storm, and we concede the explanation of the rest. Establish one miracle, and there need be no trouble about the others. Thus, for example, the miracle of the coin in the fish's mouth was probably at no time attested by other witnesses besides Peter himself. If we found it in the life of Xavier, we should only say, "Here is one more, added to the numberless and baseless legends which sprang up years after the great missionary died." To us it is commended by its place among more public miracles, by something in itself which we shall hereafter see, but especially by its connection with the best attested fact in history—the resurrection of Jesus. These things make it so easy to believe, that we do not even observe the absence of any information that it ever happened at all. We simply read that Peter was bidden to cast the hook, and we assume, as a matter of course in the circumstances, that the result followed.

Clearly then our opponent is not free to make merry over "the pigs" before he has addressed himself to the most public, the most powerfully attested, and the most spiritually fruitful of all the miracles—the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Thus our faith in the miracles resembles an arch of many stones. Like such an arch on its foundations, it rests upon solid testimony; but it is not required that every stone should touch the ground, or every incident repose directly upon such evidence. When once the base is firmly laid, the stability of all will be secured by their being properly

fitted together, by their relative adjustment to one another, to the system of which they are a part, and especially to the true conception of Jesus, Whom they ought to manifest, not only as a supernatural power, but also as the perfect and ideal Man.

In saying this, we put forward no special claim on behalf of the miraculous. When the best of witnesses steps into the box, his story cannot be checked and substantiated at every point. But the cross-examiner will lose his case if he contents himself with showing that not every point is sustained by independent testimony : he must disprove the claim that wherever it can be tested it stands the trial, and that whatever is unsubstantiated is consistent with the rest. It may be a paradox, but it is true, that in ordinary life a story consisting of many details, and vouched by many witnesses, is so judged that at one and the same time the parts are building up the whole, and the total effect is vouching for the parts. A man has a good character to start with. When the trial is over, his reputation is demolished by an accumulation of particulars, not one of which would have resisted for a moment our conviction of his integrity, while some, taken by themselves, are an actual stumbling-block to our new judgment. Taken with the rest they are not a hindrance, but a supplement and a commentary. And if we find hereafter in these strange stories, upon which unbelief loves to dwell, any indications, which we could ill spare, of the true mind of Jesus, any solid contribution towards the general effect, which is confessedly adorable, if they prove to be essential notes in a musical harmony, then the fact that they are exposed to plausible challenge, to superficial objection, and above all to ridicule, will only prove that it was no shallow, legendary, or mythical impulse which conceived and embraced them. For it is part of the adverse argument that the story was actually

modified to meet a popular sentiment, lofty enough to mould it into the Christian Messiah.

When we are bidden to contrast the evidence on which science proceeds with the evidence for the story of the swine, or the coin in the fish's mouth, two facts are deliberately or carelessly ignored. The decisions of practical life are habitually reached and held fast on evidence far from scientific. And again, science herself demands the assent of the public on slender and hearsay evidence. What evidence have we, the public, for those experiments in the high Alps by which Mr. Tyndall refuted the belief that life is being spontaneously generated? What evidence had we, first for the fishing up of protoplasm from the deep seas, and afterwards for the decision that this all-important substance was fished up, only because it had been sunk in an ill-washed vessel? Why were we invited to believe in a discovery so momentous, and then to rescind our creed again? ¹

It is objected, however, that the miracles of Jesus gained credence, merely because, in that superstitious age, it was almost as easy to believe a miracle as any other event. "As for miracles, people at that period took them for the indispensable marks of the Divine, and for the signs of prophetic vocations. The legends of Elijah and Elisha were full of them. It was settled that the Messiah should work many." "The power of working miracles passed for a licence regularly given by God to men, and had nothing surprising in it" (Renan, *V. de J.*, pp. 266-7. Ed. 15). "They were a people who, whether we think of the Jews or the Galileans, were inclined to be superficial, were

¹ "The evidence of miracles, at least to Protestant Christians, is not, in our own day, of this cogent description. It is not the evidence of our senses, but of witnesses, and even this not at first hand, but resting on the attestation of books and traditions" (J. S. Mill: "Essays on Religion," p. 219). It is twenty to one that every word of this indictment equally applied to Mill's own conviction that the earth revolves around the sun.

notoriously credulous, superstitious, and lovers of the marvellous, and among whom belief in the miraculous was daily growing stronger" (Keim, *J. of N.* iii. 169). It was an age "when no one thought it worth while to contradict any alleged miracle, because it was the belief of the age that miracles proved nothing. . . . There was scarcely any canon of probability, and miracles were thought to be the commonest of all phenomena" (J. S. Mill, *Essays on Religion*, pp. 237, 8).

As soon as one looks carefully at these bold assertions, he discovers them to be mutually destructive. It was natural that miracles should be ascribed to Jesus as soon as He was believed to be the Messiah, says Renan, because they were "indispensable marks of the Divine, and signs of a prophetic vocation." It was natural that they should pass uncontradicted, says Mill, because every one agreed that they proved nothing at all.

Nothing is plainer than that one or other of these statements was not derived from history, but from theological bias, and the supposed necessities of the situation. And this is a lesson to be remembered when next we meet with bold and generalizing assertions of the kind. We came on just such another lesson when Strauss, in the *New Life* explained the miracles by the demand for them. "Miracles He must perform, whether He would or not. As soon as He was considered to be a prophet . . . miraculous powers were attributed to Him; and as soon as they were attributed to Him, they came of course into operation." Yes, but this explanation assumes that He had first, without a miracle, attained prophetic rank: how did this come to pass? Easily enough, answered Strauss. "We cannot doubt that *He* might attain this character, as well as the Baptist, even without miracles" (i. 365). Here is wisdom indeed. On the same page, from the same paragraph, we learn that a prophet must work miracles (because

they would spring up around him, spontaneously generated); and also we are reminded that the only other prophet of the period experienced no inconvenience of the kind.

Nor does the Old Testament at all countenance the assertion that miracles were a necessary ornament of the prophetic rank. It is true that they are attributed to Elijah and Elisha (as Renan carefully mentions), but it is quite as certain that numbers of the prophets performed none, and among them was Jeremiah, whom some confounded with Jesus.

It is not only to Strauss, or by virtue of one awkward slip, that the case of the Baptist is inconvenient. The fact that he succeeded without a miracle is well attested. It rests, not only on the assertion in St. John, but also on Herod's ingenious notion, that Christ worked them because He was the Baptist, risen from the dead, and therefore possessed of the secrets of another world. This implies that John had not wrought miracles before his death. And there is further confirmation in the intense curiosity of Herod to see Jesus, and thus to behold a marvel.

Now, if John worked no miracle, and yet his rank was so well established that the chief priests would have been stoned if they denied it, what becomes of all this theorizing about the inevitable, contagious, imperative, and universal persuasion, by means of which miracles were forced on Jesus?

But there is another very practical view of the case. If the belief in miracles, and the demand for them from a prophet, was so universal, what would have become of Jesus unless He actually performed them and upon a sufficient scale? Consider, for example, His reply to the Baptist, when the faith of His forerunner was at fault. A simple-minded reader will find Keim's criticism of this passage quite astonishing. "To the Baptist's inquiries

as to His Messiahship, Jesus answered in the words of Isaiah's prophecy. . . . Did He, contrary to Isaiah's meaning, and contrary to the unequivocal final word about the spiritual gospel to the poor, refer to the physically diseased, to the physically diseased *alone*, to those who were physically raised again, as the Gospels understand Him to have done?" (*J. of N.* iii. 161). Certainly not to these alone. Such a notion is precluded indeed by the final words, but these imply, by their separate mention of evangelization, that something different was meant in the previous clauses. And it is quite absurd to suppose that Jesus quoted these without any intention that they should be literally understood, at the time when Keim admits that works of healing were eagerly expected, and were actually being evolved by this expectation, when "the confidence of men, and their misery, hastened to the new Teacher and besought His help," when He was consequently "driven further" than He anticipated (p. 173); and when there could not but "arise for Him the necessity of being the physician for the bodily as well as the spiritually sick" (p. 175). It was amid such circumstances that He, enumerating the physical ills supposed to be removed, said, "ye see and hear" these things, and bade them be repeated to John; and yet, as we are assured, the evangelists blundered egregiously in supposing all this to be anything more than a figure of speech.

In truth, the widespread and general expectation that the Messiah should work miracles, carries two results along with it, which are somewhat embarrassing to the modern rationalist. It absolutely refutes the wild notion of Mill, that by general consent a miracle proved nothing, and deserved no attention. It also raises very seriously the price at which a pretender could make his claim good. If miracles were not expected, if their effect were not discounted by the popular anticipation, then a few modest

marvels might have sufficed to impress men and to attract them. It would then have been more easy to explain such unassuming wonders by supposing, with Renan, that "the presence of a superior person treating the sick man with sweetness, and giving him, by some visible signs, the assurance of his restoration, was the decisive medicine"; that "the pleasure of seeing Him did much: He gave what He was able, a sigh, a hope, and that is not ineffectual" (*V. de J.* 270, 271). We might then be satisfied with Keim's deeper and more reverential application of the same notion, "the mere stimulation of the oppressed or dormant life of the soul would bring with it an immediate release from the predominance of, from the one-sided slavery to, material infirmities and pains" (iii. 194). Or we might accept Schenkel's variation of the same theory, that "it is not irreconcilable with the nature of the human spirit that Jesus, by His spiritual power, produced on other minds effects which manifested themselves physically"; but that these were, "after all, only effects produced by the personal human spirit." And we might even suppose that if a leper were "already in an advanced state of cure" he could "receive from Jesus an access of vital power greatly accelerating his restoration" (*Sketch of the Character of J.* pp. 69, 375).

All this would at least be less intolerable to the reason, if expectation were not on fire. But the theory is, that the public imagination first created marvels and forced them upon Jesus, and then exaggerated wildly the marvels which its eagerness and impossibility rendered possible. Who does not see that such a state of feeling would indignantly refuse to be satisfied by small responses? It is true enough that before now, upon a sudden cry of Fire, persons who were honestly bed-ridden for years, have fled for their lives. Let us grant, then, that certain forms of decrepitude, if attracted to Jesus by a wide-spread per-

suasion that He could heal, might have been so nerved and braced up by the pleasure of seeing Him, and the gift of a sigh and a hope (as Renan has it), that the disease would be charmed away. But this would not long suffice. The Old Testament prophecies spoke expressly of leprosy and blindness; nor, in the actual record, is any other form of disease more common, and more frequently relieved. Are we to believe that in fact no such sufferers publicly challenged Him? Or did excitement restore the ruined organ, the corroded tissue, the chemistry of the poisoned blood? Or would the common faith have survived one failure, not to speak of persistent failure in treating all such cases? And the Pharisees, who exhausted all the resources of self-interested malice, who actually traded on His refusal to grant a sign "from heaven," and who are found on His return from the Transfiguration eagerly questioning the disciples, amid a violently agitated concourse, because *they* have failed to cleanse a demoniac—would the Pharisees not have challenged Him, again and again, to cross the narrow limits marked for His works by the remedial effect of the imagination of the sick? The ruin of Savonarola is a fine comment upon such theories.

Besides, the public expectation found Jesus by no means so plastic in its hands. It failed to make Him either a politician or a king, how did it force Him "either to renounce His mission, or else become a thaumaturgist?" (Renan, *V. de J.*, 267).

A strange specimen of the recklessness even of distinguished writers upon this subject is that St. Paul, of all men, should have been pressed into the sceptical ranks. J. S. Mill asserts that "St. Paul, the only known exception to the ignorance and want of education of the first generation of Christians, attests no miracle but that of his own conversion, which of all the miracles of the New Testa-

ment, is the one which admits of the easiest explanation from natural causes" (*Essays on Relig.*, p. 239).

Keim does not put the matter quite so rudely, but it comes to much the same in the upshot. "The Apostle Paul was silent concerning the miracles of Jesus, and repulsed with displeasure the Jewish demand for signs" (iii. 154). Even without the last clause, which makes the meaning plain, it would be clear enough that no inference could fairly be drawn from silence "concerning the miracles of Jesus," if other miracles are relied upon, wrought by His authority and in His name. When one who is simply a follower of Jesus claims to work miracles, it is absurd to pretend that his superior culture was doubtful about the miracles of his Lord. In fact, however, St. Paul, in the very earliest of his extant epistles, asserts the resurrection of Christ as a matter entirely established, and as the warrant for expecting our own (1 Thess. iv. 14). And the assertion of Mill is false to every page of Paul's writing, unless the resurrection of Jesus is "no miracle."

As to his own miracles, their treatment in his writings is most instructive and remarkable. When his authority is conceded, and a Church is at peace within itself, he does not even mention the miraculous powers which he claimed. Now this is exactly the time when excitement would lead a fanatic to flaunt them, when calculation and self-assertion would make an impostor loud about them, when only grace would keep silent about its own performances. But the moment it is necessary to vindicate his apostolic powers, just when an enthusiast would be chilled, and an impostor reserved and cautious, he promptly and always appeals to the sanction of the supernatural. Thus his use of the miracles is at once practical, sober, and bold; and it is exhibited in the very epistles which reveal his vehement, intrepid, and yet loving nature so decisively, that criticism has least to say against their authenticity, and controver-

sialists who appeal to his sentiments at all must be taken to accept their evidence.

In the First Epistle to the Corinthians, he enumerates twice over gifts of healings, workings of powers, prophecy, speaking with divers tongues, and their interpretation (xii. 9, 10, 28).

In the Second Epistle to the same restive Church, he writes: "The signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, by signs and wonders and powers"; nor were these experiences peculiar to them, but only matters in which they were not made inferior to other Churches (xii. 12, 13).

Only the wildest fanaticism of unbelief would question the Epistle to the Galatians; and, indeed, unbelief has preferred to use it against the history of St. Luke; yet there he stakes the whole controversy upon the question, "He that supplieth to you the spirit, and worketh miracles among you, doeth he it by the works of the law or by the hearing of faith?" (iii. 5). In the Epistle to the Romans, a Church rent by internal divisions, he insists upon the things "which Christ wrought through me, for the obedience of the Gentiles, by word and deed, in the power of signs and wonders" (xv. 18, 19). In fact it is impossible for the most corrosive criticism so to dissolve the writings of the great apostle that anything shall survive, and yet to obliterate the affirmation both of his own miracles, and also of the resurrection of his Lord. To use his name, therefore, in disparagement of the miraculous in the gospel story, which is the undisguised object both of Mill and Keim, is a lamentable perversion of the evidence.

On the contrary, we may boldly contend that the evidence of the Gospels and the admissions of sceptics concerning the claims of Jesus, and the admitted writings of St. Paul, reveal a phenomenon without a parallel outside our own religion. Miracles have been attributed by other persons

to many great and good men. And again, many great and good men, from St. Augustine to Cardinal Newman, have professed a belief in contemporary miracles not their own.

What cannot be matched in history is the foundation of a great and solid movement, and then its promulgation, by deep thinkers and holy and soberminded men, who claimed that they themselves, in carrying forward such a movement, were assisted by the power of working miracles.

This is the claim which Schenkel and Strauss, Renan and Keim, admit that Jesus made, however they minimize its value. It is a claim which cannot be rent away from the writings of His mighty follower. And it stands utterly alone in the annals of the human mind.

G. A. CHADWICK.

THE HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE HOLY LAND.

INTRODUCTORY.

THE aim of these papers is to illustrate God's Word and the story of His early Church, by helping others to see, as I myself have seen, their earthly stage and background.

There are many ways of illustrating the Book by the Land, but some are wearisome and some are vain. There is, for instance, that most common and easy way, of taking one's readers along the track of one's own journey through Palestine, reproducing every adventure, scene, social custom or antiquity encountered, and labelling it with a text or story from Scripture. But such a method may easily degenerate into the sheerest showing of waxworks; it does not give a vision of the land as a whole, nor help you to hear through it the sound of running history. What is needed by the reader or teacher of the Bible is some idea